

Are All Marines Trained To Return From Combat?

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Are all Marines trained to return from combat?

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Marine forces encounter complex problems daily ranging from car bombs, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and suicide bombers who kill as many personnel as possible with no remorse for the loss of innocent life. The Marine rifle squad locates, closes with and destroys the enemy through the use of new technology, better training, and increased speed and operational tempo on the battlefield. Combat service support (CSS) units have had to adapt quickly on the battlefield in order to support the needs of these combat forces. CSS units are more likely to face the enemy on the battlefield while providing combat service support than ever before. CSS units are often seen as the critical vulnerability of a force and as easy targets. Current operations have proven this theory, yet CSS units fail to train for this reality. Marines within CSS units are inadequately trained for combat operations; because of current CSS force structure, CSS missions, and a lack of realistic training and evaluations during peacetime.

BACKGROUND

Major David Mann (USA), author of "Every Soldier a Rifleman", notes that "in the past, CSS units faced combat... but the linear nature of the battlefield allowed leaders to mitigate risk and exposure of CSS personnel and equipment".¹ Marine Corps CSS personnel's exposure to combat has increased significantly during the last two years. All CSS Marines must

now be prepared to engage the enemy while providing CSS.

"The new operational environment [current combat operations] demands a higher level of combat performance from our CSS personnel than ever before. Although killing the enemy is not their primary mission, combat service support units must be prepared to close with and destroy the enemy".² This additional mission of engaging the enemy requires additional training. The consequences of improperly trained personnel can be tragic.

Katherine Peters, author of the article "Hard Lessons", provides such an example of poor training and leadership resulting in the deaths of several soldiers during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). The 507th CSS units strayed off course on the battlefield, lost radio contact with other units and ran out of fuel... inadequate training, insufficient equipment...were blamed for the fiasco...³

The loss of Army personnel during this movement is a horrific reminder of what can go wrong without proper training. Most Marine CSS units prior to OIF I, received little tactical combat skills training and could have easily met a similar fate as the 507th. The boundaries between the front lines and the rear have become increasingly more difficult to define, "it is imperative that CSS units be trained to survive on the battlefield".⁴

To understand how the structure of CSS units causes Marines within these units to be inadequately trained, one must understand how CSS units are formed for peace and war and the differences that exist between the force service support groups (FSSGs). According to Captain Robert Burrell (USMC), author of "Combat service support in transition", "deficiencies in CSS training primarily stem from the structure of the FSSG".⁵

CSS FORCE STRUCTURE

According to Lieutenant Colonel Scanlon (USMC), author of "Training our Personnel to be operationally competent Logisticians", "FSSGs perform the CSS mission in its role as a CSS element for a Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF)... working toward the overarching goal of effective CSS for the MEF".⁶ An FSSG during peacetime is comprised of self-supporting functional battalions, which usually work independently of one another in support of a MEF. *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP-1), Warfighting*, states "operating forces should be organized for warfighting and then adapted for peacetime rather than vice versa".⁷

During peacetime, FSSGs are organized contrary to how they are organized in war, which violates Marine Corps doctrine. This peacetime and wartime deviation also violates the important Marine Corps philosophy to train as they fight. All the FSSGs are contrary to doctrine, but they are also extremely different

from one another.

Over the past decade, the development of the FSSG has made some jagged turns... the future structure of the FSSG remains unclear, and there seems to be no consensus on its evolution... without a unified vision, the 1st, 2d, and 3rd FSSGs continue to test new ideas- which often differ from each other.⁸

The difference in testing and ideas has caused several problems throughout the years, but a recent example was the supply problems [lack of support] during OIF I. These problems caused increased internal friction among CSS units and reduced responsiveness to the combat forces.

According to Lieutenant Colonel Broadmeadow (USMC), author of "Logistics support of 1st Marine Division during OIF",

OIF has shown that there is no such thing as a unified Marine Corps supply system. As units from throughout the Marine Corps came together, it was immediately apparent that no standard method of requesting or conducting re-supply existed... problems were directly attributed to the incompatibility of these systems [tests and new ideas], lack of training in their use...⁹

Every proposal or new test conducted by an FSSG, takes CSS Marines away from training. According to 1st FSSG Headquarters staff, "early in the planning for OIF, 1st FSSG recognized that its functional battalion structure was not suited for the upcoming missions it would face in Iraq".¹⁰ The same realization was made about ten years earlier during the Persian Gulf War. Movement of personnel and equipment during 1st FSSGs realignment took valuable time away from the extremely limited training time

CSS units had prior to deployment to Kuwait.

The entire realignment took approximately a month to a month and a half. During this time, accountability of personnel and equipment was the main effort of the newly formed CSS companies/battalions. What little training had been scheduled had come to a halt. Some of the personnel on the new T/Os were not actually known until a week before departing to Iraq due to manpower shortages, and inaccurate accounting of personnel.

"During wartime, functional battalions within the FSSGs are reorganized and are literally torn apart, destroying any unit cohesion which may have existed".¹¹ The reorganization of functional battalions into CSS battalions occurred during the Persian Gulf War, and is how the current CSS structure for OIF was created.

Now that 1st FSSG has almost completed its tour in Iraq and is doing a battle handover with 2nd FSSG, the structure of 1st FSSG has migrated back to the functional battalions. The notable difference is that 1st FSSG will have functional battalions prepared to perform CSS missions, with the CSS headquarters coming from the functional battalions' headquarters. "Creating a new unit to explicitly meet the requirements of an operation may be feasible, but this attempt at precision makes the employment of CSS complicated, slow and inefficient".¹² If the structure of CSS units during peacetime

and war are going to constantly change due to the execution of new tests or for deployments to combat, what missions should CSS units train for?

CSS MISSIONS

Marine Corps War Fighting Publication 4-11 defines CSS as "...the essential capabilities and functions, activities and tasks necessary to sustain all elements of the operating forces in theater at all levels of war".¹³ The definition seems straight forward, but the asymmetric battlefield has increased the number of complex tasks Marines in CSS units have to execute in order to complete their missions.

Each functional battalion within the FSSG has a list of mission essential tasks it must accomplish in order to serve the MEF. According to 1st FSSG's web page, First Maintenance Battalion has the mission "to provide intermediate level maintenance support for Marine Corps-furnished tactical communication assets/electronics, engineering, general support, motor transport and ordnance equipment".¹⁴

The mission statement fails to include the combat skills the CSS Marines must acquire to complete their combat missions. Due to operational tempo during peacetime and a garrison mentality, "CSS units, those handling logistics and maintenance, for example, are too busy keeping combat troops' [the remainder of the MEF] equipment running and supplies flowing, to master

combat tactical skills".¹⁵ The combat tactical skills are exactly what CSS Marines will need in order to complete their missions in combat.

"Commanders and maintenance personnel have become enslaved to weekly equipment readiness reports for fear their units' readiness may drop below 90%".¹⁶ This type of mentality is prominent in the Marine Corps. Many CSS units concentrate on the maintenance of equipment and supporting a MEF, and fail to train for combat missions.

Marines within CSS units are supposed to receive classes/training throughout the year to keep them proficient in combat skills and allow them to carry out their missions. Often the operational tempo within CSS units is so high that Marines from these commands fail to complete the annual and semi-annual training because they are deployed in support of back-to-back exercises. Most CSS units lack organized fire teams or squads because of the constant deployments. The lack of command structure down at the fire team and squad level contributes to poorly trained Marines because they fail to develop unit cohesion that is imperative to combat skills training.

Combat Missions of CSS Units

According to 1st FSSGs web page, Combat Service Support Battalion Twelve's [former First Maintenance Battalion] mission is

On order, conduct combat service support operations in general support... establish tailored CSS installations in order to rapidly echelon sustainment across the AO, allow tailored use of organic and MEF distribution of assets, and provide depth and range to the FSSG direct support forces... be prepared to execute direct support missions as assigned or as necessary.¹⁷

In order to accomplish the missions above, CSS Marines must be able to perform complex tasks.

Some of the missions performed by CSS units in OIF are convoy operations, providing internal security for convoys and while aboard bases, and conducting passage of lines through multiple zones belonging to several forces.

Missions conducted by CSS units have several specified and implied tasks associated with them. Some of these tasks are being able to use communication assets in order to call for fire, or request a medical evacuation, and communicate to higher and adjacent units to avoid fratricide. Other tasks include being able to employ organic weapons systems on a convoy, conduct day and night land navigation or conduct patrols.

Due to the never-before-seen speed of US maneuver forces during OIF I, in which, U.S. combat forces often elected to bypass Iraqi pockets of resistance in order to sustain the tempo of attack... CSS units providing support to combat forces had to move through unsecured and fluid areas of operations... the ability to react to enemy contact and engage weapon systems in response to the convoy attacks and ambushes is essential to the overall success of any operation.¹⁸

Newly task organized CSS units, who have had little time to train together as a team, must now complete some of the most difficult missions and tasks in actual combat.

How can implicit trust be formulated with strangers who have been immediately thrown into the chaos of deployment? CSS should underscore personnel relationships and training rather than imposing strict order on manpower and equipment...¹⁹

In order to ensure CSS Marines are prepared for combat, "we need to take time today to train and educate them to function outside their comfort zone of just working in their specialty", and become a warrior who can survive that initial contact with the enemy.²⁰

Training

According to Marine Corps Order 1510.121, *Marine Corps Common Skills (MCCS) Program*, "every Marine regardless of military occupational specialty (MOS) will be taught the common skills needed to fight and win on today's battlefields".²¹ However this type of training is limited in CSS units, the need is greater than ever given the current situation.

CSS units training continues to be oriented toward providing logistics support, both in peace and in war. Department of Defense transformation efforts and the new operational challenges of the Global War on Terrorism demand CSS units take a fresh look at the balance between training for combat and providing support. To be able to provide logistics support, CSS unit also must be trained to kill in combat.²²

CSS Marines are expected to complete the mission

requested by the supported unit in garrison and during war. In order to complete the missions requested by the supported units CSS Marines need to:

Meet the ITS for their grade and demonstrate familiarity of the next higher grade... Marines must remain proficient as a rifleman, annually receive solid combat skills training, basic skills training... In modern warfare the distinction between the front and the rear are increasingly blurred necessities being basically trained above all other priorities.²³

For example, a sergeant 3531 (motor vehicle operator) must know how to call for a medical evacuation if one of his/her Marines is hit with enemy fire and he/she must know immediate action drills to perform if a particular event occurs. All of these immediate action drills must be so ingrained in the Marine that their actions are instinctive, and reactionary.

One way to obtain this instinctive response when faced with a particular event is through the use of standard operating procedures (SOPs). Marines use SOPs to ensure that every Marine knows what to do when a particular event occurs. Knowing SOPs allows Marines to branch off of a procedure quickly if the situation dictates, a common point to deviate from is essential in combat.

CSS units do not have SOPs related to combat tactical skills while in garrison. Prior to OIF I, many units within the FSSG were fractured when it came to choosing an SOP to follow. It takes time to become proficient at actually understanding an

SOP and actually executing it. When conducting training, the training needs to start slow and grow in complexity. Training takes time and proficiency in combat skills.

In order to become proficient in these areas of training, CSS Marines need exposure to some of the new technology that is in the operating forces today. However, there is a large gap between CSS units training and infantry forces training.

In fact, there is a large disparity in the fielding of weapons systems, such as the M249, M203, and ACOG combat optic between the CSS units and the infantry units. CSS Marines are often the last to receive the associated training for those weapons systems as well. During OIF I and OIF II, RCT-7 MT platoon had been one of the most engaged platoons of any platoons in RCT-7, including the infantry platoons of the RCT-7.²⁴

During workups for OIF I, 1st FSSG communication assets were insufficient to train for convoy operations and basic radio procedures. During OIF I, many convoys were sent out without proper communication assets. If one of these convoys did have radios, the operators were usually non-communicators and were poorly trained since they were never exposed to the technology in garrison.

Another disparity between the training that infantry units receive and CSS Marines is the allocated ammunition for training. Ammunition allowances set aside for CSS units are considerably less than those for infantry units. Current conditions in Iraq, calls for all Marines to be prepared to

engage the enemy with every type of weapons systems in order to complete their missions. Currently the allocation for FSSGs is not enough to conduct realistic training. CSS Marines must receive the proper training to survive on the battlefield. An increase in ammunition allocations for CSS units is a necessity.

Evaluations

In addition to the lack of training, CSS Marines are inadequately prepared for combat because of the almost non-existent forms of evaluation for how CSS units perform on exercises. Feedback for CSS units on an exercise is usually brief: "CSS was good" or "CSS was terrible". An example of a lack of evaluation for CSS units exists at the combined arms exercise (CAX).

There is literally no emphasis on combat service support (CSS). This places CSS units and combat unit logistics sections at a distinct disadvantage. There is no training package, no classroom instruction on technical CSS, no tactical or administrative coverage of CSS unit... There are no metrics to evaluate success or failure of logistical missions and requirements, and no oversight of CSS operations.²⁵

Recently the CSS portion of CAX has been addressed with proposed changes to the exercise in order to evaluate CSS units better. Unfortunately, OIF has temporarily delayed the actual implementation of the new forms of evaluation. All components of the MAGTF except CSS units are afforded the opportunity to develop, rehearse and enact and refine their SOPs, and overall

performance during a CAX.

Two types of evaluations exist in the Marine Corps, practical exercise and knowledge based testing. Most CSS units are unable to complete practical exercises. They use excuses that they were unable to obtain the use of a range or they did not have enough ammunition to conduct the training. As a result, the knowledge based testing is the only form of evaluation CSS Marines receive. Usually, this testing is conducted once a year in the form of the Basic Skills Test (BST). CSS units should devote time and energy to using practical exercises to test Marines, and properly train them for combat.

Counter Argument

Some may argue the issues discussed in this paper sound like a leadership failure, or a time management problem. This is not the case; CSS leaders are constantly working on a myriad of other tasks which they must accomplish such as: planning on how to support a MEF in combat, trying to conduct annual and semi-annual training and finally, "ensuring every Marine is personally ready to go to war by being medically, dentally, and financially ready, and by ensuring family members have the tools to handle deployments".²⁶ Junior Staff Non-Commissioned Officers in CSS units are often below the level of proficiency in combat tactical skills required to train and supervise junior Marines.

Command backing for training in garrison is often lacking because it interferes with CSS missions in support of a MEF. CSS units support the MEF first and then try to accomplish their annual/semi-annual training events. A better balance must be achieved.

Conclusion

About ten years elapsed between the Persian Gulf War and OIF I. Lessons were learned for combat service support units during the Persian Gulf War, they were acknowledged, and then forgotten/dismissed. Marines in support of OIF I scrambled to task organize into CSS units and load equipment on ships prior to departure to Kuwait. Little or no training in combat tactical skills occurred for these CSS units. Will history repeat itself in another ten years?

In order to prepare CSS Marines for combat operations, a force structure must be developed that is conducive to training and minimizes the internal friction that is caused by new ideas and tests. Secondly CSS missions in garrison and war must be clearly defined and kept as similar as possible. Finally, CSS units must receive equal training opportunities and better forms of evaluations. Until these areas are corrected CSS Marines will continue to be inadequately trained for combat.

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End Notes

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